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SUBJECT: WEST BENGAL RE-ESTABLISHES GOVERNMENT PRESENCE IN MAOIST
AREAS, BUT ATTACKS CONTINUE

REF: A. A) KOLKATA 287

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[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Since June 2009 state and central police have operated in West Bengal's three Maoist/Naxal insurgency-affected districts to re-assert government presence, eliminate anti-government armed resistance and win local tribal support. While police have re-established a limited government presence and arrested several suspected Maoist leaders, they have not eliminated the Maoist threat. The People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA), a local tribal organization that was formed in response to the police crackdown in the district in November 2008, has been discredited due to its association with the armed Maoists. The West Bengal state government has recently shown greater resolve in tackling the Maoist security challenge, but it and the opposition lack a clearly articulated strategy of political engagement. While the Indian domestic media continues to focus on the lack of security in some of these remote, tribal areas, life in the urban metropolis of Kolkata goes on with a notable lack of concern on the issue.

West Bengal's Three Maoist-Affected Districts

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Maoist presence in West Bengal is concentrated in the three administrative districts of West Midnapore, Purulia and Bankura. The 2,100 sq km area, or approximately 2.4 percent of West Bengal, is located approximately 250 km west of the state capitol of Kolkata, in a region bordering the neighboring states of Bihar and Jharkhand. Overwhelmingly tribal, the 250,000 residents are poor and have been left out of the state's economic development. West Bengal is one of seven states affected by Maoist violence, the others being Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.

Government Present, but Attacks Continue

[1](#)3. (SBU) Since June, a 4,000-strong combined state and central police force have re-established administrative and police presence throughout the affected area, ever since closing or severely limiting operations there in December 2008 (Reftel B). The operation's second accomplishment was the arrest and capture of Chhatradhar Mahato, the spokesman for the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA) - a group promoting the local tribal population that is now widely viewed as a front

organization for the banned Communist Party of India - Maoist. According the Additional Director General of West Bengal Police, Raj Kanojia, Mahato's capture and subsequent interrogation has facilitated the investigations into Maoist activities in the area.

¶4. (SBU) At the same time, Maoists continue to attack government personnel, property and political parties in the districts. On October 20, a group of approximately 20-30 Maoists robbed a bank and attacked the Sankrail police post, taking one policeman hostage. The Maoists eventually released the hostage in exchange for the release of 23 tribals in police custody. On October 27, PCAPA supporters detained a train enroute to New Delhi to protest the police action in West Bengal and demand release of arrested supporters (Reftel A). On November 9, Maoists ambushed and killed four policemen in West Midnapore district shortly after the Chief Minister had finished his two-day visit to the affected area. One of the top Maoist leaders, Politburo member Koteswar Rao, aka Kishanji, still remains at large. The state government appears unable to stop the string of attacks.

PCAPA Exposed and Discredited

¶5. (SBU) The PCAPA had been formed in November 2008 to protest the police crackdown on the local population following the unsuccessful improvised explosive device attack on the Chief Minister's convoy earlier that month. For a time, it had been

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viewed as a legitimate interlocutor and representative of oppressed tribals. However, its public image as a political organization distinct from the violent Maoist movement suffered in light of information gleaned from Mahato's capture and arrest, the October 20 police station attack and the October 27 train detainment. While the PCAPA itself is not currently banned, the state government has indicated a willingness to ban it as well, given its recently stated intention to raise an armed militia. Intellectuals that had previously advocated for engagement with PCAPA as the voice of the oppressed and disenfranchised are now silent on the organization. The Maoists have temporarily lost what had been viewed as a legitimate public mouthpiece for their cause.

Political Engagement Lacking, While Political Accusations Fly

¶6. (SBU) Neither the state government nor the opposition has articulated a strategy of engaging the Maoists politically, although the Indian Home Minister P.C. Chidambaram has publically stated that the GOI is willing to talk to any group that is willing to pursue its objectives politically within the Indian democratic system without resorting to violence. Despite their political differences, the central and state governments have indicated a willingness to work with one another; state police officials have confirmed a degree of intra-state coordination for the upcoming planned anti-Maoist police action.

However, at the state level, the ruling party, the Communist Party of India-Marxist, and the main opposition party, Trinamool, alternately accuse one another of partnering with the Maoists to eliminate their political opponents. According to a journalist who visited the area during the recent parliamentary elections in April/May 2009, neither party is very active in the area as compared with the rest of the state. Recently, both have been victim of Maoist attacks. The leader of the state opposition party, and current national Railways Minister, Mamata Banerjee, has gone so far as to challenge the state government

to prove an alleged Mamata-Maoist nexus and if so "throw her in jail", while she goes on lamenting an alleged Marxist (CPI-M)-Maoist connection. Post does not know definitively whether the mainstream political parties in West Bengal maintain contact with the Maoists, although in the past both have been rumored to have done so.

Lessons from Lalgarh: Improved Communications, Mobility and Intelligence

¶17. (SBU) According to police and media contacts, the anti-Maoist police action in Lalgarh has exposed the need for improved police communications, mobility and intelligence to confront the Maoist security challenge. The Maoist's attack on the Sankrail police station, in which two policemen were killed and one taken hostage, further highlights the need for better physical security. On October 25, the state government announced that it would spend USD 1.5 million on security improvements at 30 police stations in the three districts. West Bengal police contacts indicate that the lessons from the recent police operation are being integrated into the central government's upcoming anti-Maoist operations.

Comment

¶18. (SBU) Countering the Maoist insurgency in the remote tribal areas of West Bengal and other neighboring states will take a concerted whole-of-government approach addressing security, governance and development (Reftel C). To date, most of the public rhetoric has focused on the security challenges posed by the Maoists and a corresponding police response. Lately, there have been overtures of political dialogue if the Maoists cease their violent attacks. The continuing attacks may however be counter-productive for the Maoists as they appear to have strengthened the state government's resolve to apply force as required. It appears to be easier for the government to deploy police, than engage as politicians; and for the Maoists to detain trains, than positively contribute to the economies of

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the surrounding communities. The challenge for the government of India is not only to contain, but to eliminate the Maoist violence in the remote, isolated parts of the country and offer political engagement and development opportunities to the largely poor and disenfranchised tribal populations. Unfortunately, while the Indian domestic media, police and some elements of the state and national government are seized with the issue, life in the urban metropolis of Kolkata goes on with a notable lack of concern on the issue.
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